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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO SOUTHEAST

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SUMMARY

1.(SBU) Ambassador visited Diyarbakir, Mardin and Sanliurfa May 26-29, meeting with governors, mayors, party officials, NGO representatives, journalists and academics. The regional press followed the visit closely, and accurately reported his characterization of the PKK and support for it as "dead ends." The Ambassador stressed at every stop US determination to continue support for Turkey in its efforts against the PKK and for Turkey's democratization process. Interlocutors in Diyarbakir focused extensively on the rioting there in late March, and the political, economic, and social problems in the southeast caused by PKK terrorism, the state's response, the migration of hundreds of thousands from villages to the region's towns and cities, and the unresolved question of Kurdish ethnic identity. Such problems loom less large in Mardin and Sanliurfa, more ethnically mixed cities that have benefitted to some extent from a nascent tourism industry and irrigation from the Southeast Anatolia (GAP) project. At a May 29 conference at Harran University in Sanliurfa co-sponsored by the State University of New York (SUNY), the Ambassador joined former President Suleyman Demirel in highlighting the need to develop human as well as infrastructure resources in the GAP region in order to meet the challenges of globalization. End Summary.

DIYARBAKIR REMAINS "A TROUBLED CITY"

2.(SBU) In two days of meetings in Diyarbakir, the Ambassador met with provincial Governor Efkan Ala, mayor Osman Baydemir (pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party - DTP), human rights lawyers, and business leaders. Baydemir described Diyarbakir as a "troubled" city suffering under the weight of a migration that has tripled the city's population over the past 20 years and pushed the local unemployment rate to around 60 percent (though business leaders put the figure at closer to 40 percent). He said people in Diyarbakir are concerned about increasing violence and a "regression" in Turkey's path toward democratization. Baydemir added that recent tensions had dashed hopes that the Kurdish issue, which he called the root cause of the region's problems, might be addressed by the AKP Government. Baydemir and human rights activists in Diyarbakir said the Government needs to find a way to implement some form of amnesty for a significant number of PKK militants if it hopes to bring an end to the current clashes and split the PKK foot-soldiers from the organization's radical leadership.

3. (SBU) Both Baydemir and state-appointed Governor Ala said that most of the demonstrators during the Diyarbakir riots in late March were children who had grown up in poverty and an atmosphere of violence. Baydemir also claimed that Turkish security forces went "out of control" on the third day of violence, thereby prolonging the riots and increasing the number of casualties. This view was supported by human rights lawyers, who also claimed that many of the children arrested following the disturbances had been abused by police. All interlocutors praised the Governor and the Mayor for their efforts to restore calm. Ala blamed the violence squarely on the PKK, which he said had "entered the cities because it had been unsuccessful in the mountains." Baydemir argued that both the PKK and elements of the state opposed to Turkey's democratization had a hand in provoking the demonstrators. Diyarbakir AK party chairman Abdurrahman Kurt supported Baydemir's claim, and accused these same groups of using threats of violence in an unsuccessful effort to sabotage Prime Minister Erdogan's recent visit to the city. Governor Ala

identified Diyarbakir's top problem as unemployment exacerbated by years of PKK terrorism. He added that the continuation of Turkey's democratic reform process is the most effective weapon against terrorism, and noted recent advances in Kurdish language broadcasts. Ala said the US could help Turkey address the region's problems through strong support for Turkey's democratization process and continued cooperation with Turkey against terrorism.

¶4. (SBU) All interlocutors in Diyarbakir agreed that there is little popular support in the region for a return to violence, and said that most people strongly support democratic reforms and Turkey's EU process. A human rights lawyer from the nearby city of Batman put it this way: "People would like to live as Kurds, but together with the Turks. They want to develop economically and benefit from all the opportunities of modern life." Several lawyers at the Diyarbakir Bar Association warned that the region's festering social and economic problems combined with the slowdown in democratization has produced fertile ground for radical Islam in the city's poor and migrant neighborhoods (a concern echoed the previous week by a former Diyarbakir MP at a lunch with the Ambassador). They noted that the largest demonstration in the Middle East against the Danish cartoons had taken place in Diyarbakir, and that a recent meeting organized by Islamist extremists there had attracted 70,000 people.

¶5. (SBU) A group of journalists who met with the Ambassador over lunch painted a bleak picture of Diyarbakir as a city confronted by an increasingly alienated young generation that was easily manipulated toward violence and extremism. They said PKK militants still enjoy widespread popular support, but echoed the view that people were tired of the violence and "wanted their children to come down from the mountains." One correspondent commented that the best barometer of popular support for the PKK was the regional vote across the Southeast for the (Kurdish-based) Democratic Society Party (DTP), which has been gradually been losing ground to the AKP. He predicted that the DTP will look for an excuse to pull out of next year's general election rather than risk further erosion in its vote count, an indication that the PKK may be operating from a position of weakness rather than strength.

MARDIN AND SANLIURFA: KURDS AND ARABS, TOURISM AND THE GAP

¶6. (U) The nearby provinces of Mardin and Sanliurfa have been less affected by PKK terrorism and related violence, in part because they are more ethnically diverse. The population of Mardin, for example, is roughly a 50-50 split between Kurds and Arabs, with a small Syriac Christian minority. Sanliurfa also has a large Arab population. Governors and mayors in both places highlighted their efforts to lure tourists to the region, a proposition that would have seemed far-fetched even a decade ago. By all appearances, these efforts are having some success, though officials in Mardin acknowledged that reservations and the number of visitors had dropped significantly following the violence in late March. More than 400,000 tourists, including 40,000 foreigners, visited Mardin last year, drawn by the distinctive stone-carving and domestic architecture of the old city, a plethora of ancient ruins, and nearby Syriac monasteries that are increasingly catering to visitors. The Ambassador toured many of these sights as part of his visit, often trailed by a pack of camera-toting reporters and locals who appreciated his interest in the region's cultural and historic heritage.

¶7. (U) Prospects in Sanliurfa are brighter still, according to the governor and mayor, due to an upsurge in "faith tourism" and agricultural gains from the irrigation provided by the GAP project. The Sanliurfa mayor proudly told the Ambassador that although most of Sanliurfa's tourists are Turks, "if we can explain to Europeans and Americans that Abraham was born here, Moses lived here, and Jesus regarded this as a holy place, there is no telling how many would come." He displayed a scale model projection of the city's development over the next decade, featuring a significant expansion of Sanliurfa's pleasant municipal park that envelopes a complex of holy sites beneath the cliff-top remains of a Roman fortress. The Ambassador also visited the nearby ruins of the

ancient city of Harran, which locals claim was home to the world's oldest university. Even here, on the baking hot plain near the Syrian border, local entrepreneurs are building hotels and other tourist facilities for what they expect to be continued growth in the tourism industry.

AMBASSADOR, FORMER PRESIDENT OPEN SUNY CONFERENCE

18. (U) On May 29, the modern-day Harran University, established in the 1980s just outside of Sanliurfa, hosted an international conference on sustainable development. The conference was co-sponsored by Turkey's Higher Education Board (YOK) and the State University of New York (SUNY), and highlighted SUNY's growing exchange program with Turkish universities that will bring more than 2,200 Turkish undergraduates to SUNY for the coming academic year. Ambassador and former Turkish President Suleyman Demirel delivered remarks at the conference's opening session, stressing the importance of US-Turkish educational exchange and the need to develop human as well as infrastructure resources in the region in order to meet the challenges of globalization. SUNY Chancellor John Ryan and International Affairs Director, Retired Ambassador Robert Gosende, received a warm welcome from the many Turkish university rectors in attendance.

WILSON